

# Fifty Shades of Seriality and E-Readers Games

Key Note Speech

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## Abstract

Jim Collins' keynote lecture focuses on serial narrative and e-readers, their simultaneous developments and interconnections. He considers how both the bestseller and the blockbuster have been changed in fundamental ways because of the coupling of narrative format and digital device.

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## Serial narrative and e-readers

I should begin by explaining my title since it might raise expectations that I will be discussing something at least vaguely pornographic. I will be investigating the pleasures of popular culture, licit, illicit, and otherwise, but this is not an extended reading of the work of E.L. James. On the other hand, I do concentrate on the coupling of two hugely attractive principals that have generated enormous media buzz individually, and I reflect, quite explicitly, on how their union can lead to endlessly prolonged pleasure be-

fore the thundering final climax, all experienced in the most intimate of places.

In other words, I am focusing on serial narrative and e-readers.

Each has its own history, but how do these simultaneous developments shape how the other works? Each of these phenomena are massive research subjects unto themselves, but I want to explore their mutual impact, and consider how both the bestseller and the blockbuster have been changed in fundamental ways because of that coupling of narrative format and digital device.

When I sent my title to the organizers of this conference, I thought *Shades of Grey* and *Hunger Games* might be useful texts to talk about the connections between seriality and e-readers but I did not anticipate how vividly connected these phenomena would be in terms of exactly these titles. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the three volumes of *Shades of Grey*, the collected version of the Grey trilogy and the three volumes of the *Mockingjay* trilogy were seven of the top eight bestselling ebook titles in 2012. In fact, only two of the top ten ebook bestsellers were not part of series since, *Bared to You*, the first volume in Sylvia Day's *Crossfire Series*, came in at number nine. And then Amazon very usefully began using this image to promote their Kindle reader.



This image, in particular, crystallizes the contemporary state of the adaptation at the intersection of seriality and digital devices. What I find most interesting about the domination of serial narrative on the ebook bestseller charts is that the successful synergy between the two is not restricted to a particular genre or audience. There are indeed many shades of seriality – Young Adult Fiction and Mommy Porn titles are both thriving as different genres for divergent audiences in the same serial mode on the same delivery system. But the list of genres and audiences grows still longer if we look at other Kindle advertisements, such as which feature *Mad Men* and *True Blood*. Apparently, we have to add quality serial television drama to that list which expands dramatically not just the range of genres and audiences, but the cultural status of the texts involved. American quality television sits just as squarely at the intersection of serial narrative and digital device as the young adult bestseller. And we can expand that range of televisual seriality further still to include the most highly pedigreed forms of literary fiction, now that the first two novels in Hilary Mantel's Tudor trilogy, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up*

*the Bodies* have both won Man Booker prizes (which in and of itself is testimony to the changing status of seriality) and are now in development as BBC /HBO co-productions. At this point, we can argue that different shades of seriality extend all the way up and down the cultural hierarchy; and your portable media device of choice can deliver the entire spectrum.

My determination to pursue the ubiquity of ever longer narrative formats in tandem with the increasing ubiquity of digital devices might at first seem like an odd move since one of the common assumptions about e-readers is that they are decreasing attention spans through perpetual distraction and will only shorten narrative formats to even smaller bytes of information. Nicolas Carr makes exactly this argument in his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (2011), contending that

When a printed book is transferred to an electronic device connected to the internet, it turns into something very like a Web site. Its words become wrapped in all the distractions of the networked computer. It loses what the late John Updike called its 'edges' and dissolves into the vast, roiling waters of the net. The linearity of the printed book is shattered and along with it the calm attentiveness it encourages from the reader. The high tech features of devices like the Kindle and Apple's new iPad may make it more likely that we'll read e-books, but the way we read them will be very different from the way we read printed books. (p.104)

Once the material object that is the book changes from page to digital screen, Carr is convinced that close reading and extended narrative formats will inevitably disappear. He laments that no one will have interest in reading *War and Peace* again because it is just too long. Change the object that is the book and suddenly attention spans shorten, long form narrative shrinks into sound bites, and deep reading is no longer necessary. According to this scenario, reading on e-reader is the gateway drug that leads inevitably to the hard stuff of digital culture –become psychologically dependent on that e-reader and eventually you will find yourself in an alley some-

where with a cell-phone novel written by promiscuous Japanese teenagers sticking out of your arm.

The variety of texts on the screen in the Kindle Fire could, of course, be read as evidence of inherent distractability and Angry Birds is part of that mix, but so are serial narratives like *Mad Men* and *Hunger Games* and *True Blood* which take for granted the ability to acquire and hold knowledge about narrative universes that extend over thousands of pages or several seasons of episodes which seem pretty close to being the opposite of the endless distractability Carr alleges is to be the case with the e-reader.

But changing the material form of the book does not necessarily result in this domino effect where close reading and long form narrative must inevitably disappear. Quite the opposite appears to be the case. I think Lisa Gittelman's definition of a medium is especially useful here. She argues that a medium is a technology that enables communication, but it also depends on "protocols": those social and cultural practices which determine the functions and values a medium might take on over time. She considers recorded music to be a medium that has been around for over a century, but the delivery systems have changed from cylinders, to records, to CDs to MP3 files. If we were to adapt this to a long form narrative, we could argue that the shift from wood pulp to e-reader is a change in delivery system. While I will explore this relationship between medium and delivery system in greater detail later in this lecture I think it is a useful point of departure for understanding literary experiences within digital cultures precisely because it allows us to see isolate individual aspects of the literary experience which have been considered so tightly imbricated that they are thought to be intrinsically interconnected. We have been led to believe that literary reading depends on an object called a book, an extended narrative format called a novel, a degree of engagement called close or "deep" reading, and a literary culture which makes qualitative distinctions about what does and does not belong in that category. The anxious debates about the future of literary culture seize only on the first element, the material form of the book itself, and then predict drastic changes about the future of reading because they assume that the other three factors automatically change accordingly, which in turn is based on the assumption that these factors are indivisible aspects of literary reading. But long form narrative and close reading can be pried away

from literary reading – in fact there appears to be an industry devoted to doing exactly that.

### **The serial narrative across media**

The fact that the quality television serial in the manner of HBO now appears to be the format of choice for the kind of sophisticated storytelling formerly thought to be the exclusive domain of the literary novel figures as an important pivot point in three different historical arcs. Television scholars such as Jeffery Sconce and Jason Mittell have argued convincingly that the textual universes that now expand to seventy or eighty hours of continuous narrative development mark a new epoch in television history because the tyranny of 30 and 60 minute program formats has at last been overthrown. That the kind of quality serial programming which first became prominent on HBO somehow exceeded the medium as we knew it a decade ago was summarized by its very tagline “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO,” and now appears to have become the model for so many other television channels desperate to incorporate long format series, suggests that there has indeed been a paradigm shift in television narrative. But rather than belabor this well-documented point, I want to explore two other questions – what does quality seriality suggest about the evolving relationship between literary culture and visual culture? And ultimately, what does the interplay between seriality and digital devices tell us about contemporary narrativity?

In my recent book, *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, my goal was to trace the contours of a particular “media ecology” shaped by the increasing convergence of literary, visual, and material cultures. The phenomena that I examined in detail – adaptation films, Amazon.com, television and internet book clubs, and literary best-sellers – are best understood as interdependent components of a popular literary culture.

I concentrated on the Miramax adaptation films such as *The English Patient*, *Shakespeare in Love*, and *The Hours* because they exemplified the emergence of a *cine-literary* culture in which canonical and prize-winning contemporary literary fiction became a very particular form of prestige blockbuster filmmaking. There, I described the pre-history of the Miramax adaptation in the 1970s and eighties, a time when Hollywood’s obsession with high-concept spectacle and teen pics had reduced the adaptation to the world of Public Television in

the United States, specifically *Masterpiece Theatre* on Sunday nights which specialized in importing BBC television adaptations that were long on British literary prestige, but short on production values, and even shorter on audience share.

The adaptation was primarily a televisual phenomenon during the seventies. It suffered accordingly, surviving in what had become genteel poverty growing ever more faded as its production values seemed ever more impoverished compared to mainstream film and network television. Once the Merchant and Ivory films such as *A Room with a View* and *Howards End* that began to appear in the mid- to late eighties, a small but viable niche audience for adaptation film was consolidated, the lush production values were restored, and the adaptation was rescued from the ghetto of public television in the U.S.

And then, when Miramax's high-concept literary adaptations became dependable Academy Award magnets by the mid-nineties, the new equation was solidified: the British-made serial adaptations seen on public television in the U.S. signified cheap and irrelevant, as Miramax adaptations became ever more opulent "event pictures" with high production values, star-studded casts, and adapted screenplays by the likes of Tom Stoppard and David Hare, all benefiting from maximum promotion by the brothers Weinstein.

But if we fast-forward fifteen years from the Academy Award orgy given to *Shakespeare in Love* in 1998 to last month's broadcast in the U.S. of the BBC/HBO co-production of *Parade's End*, the adaptation equations between media have shifted yet again, particularly in regard to the cultural value of seriality and the "national identity" as it were of serious narrative fiction. When George Entwistle, BBC's Director General announced the air-date for this mini-series based on the tetralogy of novels by Ford Maddox Ford, he said that it would be as good as *Mad Men* and *The Wire*. When the chief spokesperson for the British Broadcasting Corporation promises that a mini-series adaptation of a series of novels by Ford Maddox Ford, which have been judged by Graham Green and Julian Barnes to be among the greatest masterpieces of British Literary Modernism, will be outstanding because it will be just as good as a couple of American TV shows then the relationship between literary fiction and quality television has been revalued.

Obviously there is another kind of “media ecology” at work since the status of adaptation, seriality, and the transatlantic identity of high culture have changed profoundly since Miramax was in love with Shakespeare. The desire to adapt the canonical British novel persists but the models for its adaptation are, in the case of both *Mad Men* and *The Wire*, original programming developed for American television – anything but old *Masterpiece Theatre* classics. And the American-ness of that new quality television is, if anything, advertised aggressively as such, as seen in the advertisement for SKY Atlantic, which brings Europe the best of HBO and AMC (<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txcbk3tV2Hc>>).

In this promotional ad for SKY Atlantic, “stories” appear to be fairly important to Dustin Hoffman, accompanied by the New York skyline, but one thing is certain – the sort of stories that are so good that we wish they would never end are serial narratives on American cable television – because they do indeed almost never end, even when you would like them to. This fetishizing of story is hardly surprising, given that the networks which produce these programs describe themselves in exactly the same terms – the AMC tagline is “*Story Matters Here*” and HBO insists “*Let the Stories Begin.*” There are no books surrounding Dustin or anything that looks like a library to function as signifiers of literariness – great stories do not have to come from books anymore because the most sophisticated narratives are no longer restricted to a print-based literary phenomenon. The profusion of books in the *Masterpiece Theatre* title sequence continued throughout the Miramax adaptations of the late nineties and early twenty-first century where the fetishizing of the book and the hands of the English authors writing those books that were the basis for the adaptation at hand remained a consistent visual motif, evidenced by the frequent close-ups of both as quasi-sacred objects in *Shakespeare in Love*, *Finding Neverland*, and *The Hours*. In contrast, Hoffman is surrounded only by cinematic values and the American urban landscape in all of its jump-cut, hand-held glory, which appears to be where all *these* great stories come from. Transatlantic quality television now appears to have become relentlessly serial, cinematic, and resolutely American.

It is, of course, tempting to argue that if the Miramax adaptation film represented the essence of cine-literary culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, the HBO/BBC adaptation like *Parade's End* ex-

emphasies a contemporary *tele-literary* culture in which the serial has superseded the feature film as the format of choice for literary narrative. Hilary Mantel sold her Man Booker-prize winning novels to BBC and HBO, not to the Weinstein brothers or Focus Features. But the emphasis on *stories* in the Sky Atlantic advertisement suggests a more far-reaching change is underway – namely that the print or image-based nature of the medium is no longer the determinant of narrative complexity or its cultural value – now it is all about “story” and the delivery system, or more precisely, serial stories of indefinite length; and Sky Atlantic, the global television-art house-library, can hook you up with that exactly that type of story.

The interrelationship between format, medium, and creative enterprise change accordingly. Much was made in the press about how Stoppard’s screenplay for *Parade’s End* marked his return to the BBC after a 35-year hiatus. In contextualizing that return, Mark Lawson makes the essential point that while it was relatively common for the British playwrights to move back and forth between the theatre and television in the sixties, the single TV play was slowly phased out of British television as the serial form became increasingly dominant, just as the tele-film series had replaced the anthology dramas on American television by the late fifties. At that point, the television serial was the antithesis of legitimate theatre and the truly literary which were singular works of art – the very notion that narrative closure could be prolonged indefinitely was proof positive of market pressures and their inherent inferiority as a narrative mode intended for children, housewives, and mindless coach potatoes. The rapid elevation of seriality from one of the lowest forms of television entertainment to one of the highest forms of cultural expression in any medium depends on a number of factors; but the redefinition of seriality by HBO and AMC depended, to a great extent, on making the writer the lynch-pin of the successful series; and this move toward a production model which values stories and the people who write them above all has lured a number of literary novelists to television. Stoppard may have co-written the screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love*, but he now says he prefers writing for television because it is far closer to writing for the theatre. Where seriality was once synonymous with a lack of authorial vision and creative possibility, it is now being hailed for the creative potential it offers literary authors, a point articulated in no uncertain terms by Pulitzer



Prize winning novelist Michael Chabon, who said, “There can’t be a novelist in America who watched *The Wire* and didn’t think, ‘Oh my god I want to do something like that.’ The tapestry is so broad it’s like a nineteenth century novel.” For a television serial to be compared to the nineteenth-century novel – the very gold standard of the art of narrative – and judged therefore infinitely superior to the constraints that come with the mere feature film, suggests just how thoroughly the revaluation process has been accomplished. Salman Rushdie, one of the acknowledged masters of the 20th-century novel who is developing a science fiction series for *Showtime*, echoes Chabon’s assessment of the situation: “You can write as freely as you want. It’s a novelistic amount of time. The major creative forces in these novels are the writers.”

### **Sophisticated stories of indefinite length**

If stories, specifically sophisticated stories of indefinite length, are no longer medium specific, then what should we call them, and how will they be categorized? Mittel has argued that the DVD box set has provided a “shelve-ability” factor for the television series which enables close reading of television texts which makes possible ever more complicated televisual narrative universes. Where Rushdie uses the word “novelistic” to describe the amount of time a story is allowed to unfurl on the television serial, the shelvability factor allows for another kind of novelistic time in regard to these series, namely, the temporality of a novelistic *mode of viewing* where episodes are watched and re-watched in the same kind of endlessly variable rate that novels are read and reread chapter by chapter. I think this is a convincing argument but I would like to frame the situation in another way.

Sophisticated stories of indefinite length are no longer medium specific just because writers such as Stoppard, Chabon, and Rushdie will work across media on an even more regular basis. The redefinition of the status of extended long format narrative is certainly driven by changes in authorship and the move to a publishing model for television exhibition, but it is also a direct by-product of the digital devices on which we consume all of the above. The screen on which I watch BBC/HBO’s version of *Parade’s End* is the same screen on which I read my ebook edition of Ford Maddox Ford’s novel, and both form part of the personal digital libraries

which sit inside that screen and I take with me wherever I go. When novels, films, television programs, and songs are all files downloadable from the same sites, all playback-able on the same portable devices, they are all different incarnations of the same screen culture. At this point, I want to return to the distinction between medium and delivery system that I referred to in my introduction. Are television serials and MP3 files just the newest delivery system for long format narratives, or does their co-presence on the same playback screens, in the same personal digital archives, become a new supra-medium in which watching, reading, listening, and surfing the net are all subsumable to the pleasure of playlisting? I use the term playlisting here to refer not just to the lists of songs one might compose but as a mentalite, a way of constructing a more or less coherent personal identity cut to the exact measure of our personal cultural obsessions we assemble in our digital archives. The edges of the book that Carr refers to do indeed become elastic, as do the edges of the television programs, films, paratexts, or any other files downloaded or accessed from there.

The media ecology of popular literary culture that I described in *Bring on the Books for Everybody* was all about the expansion of the literary experience across print, visual and material cultures. The smart tablet represents the perfect compression of the movements across those cultures by making them all co-equal options on one device. This multi-functionality has important ramifications for how we understand the metaverses of serial narratives. The term metaverse is often used to describe the complicated narrative universe of a serial program or film franchise as it progresses from season to season or film to film across years and even decades. I think the metaverse of a given program like say *Mad Men* is better understood as expanding along two axes simultaneously – the horizontal axis, which entails the expansion of the narrative universe from season to season in more or less linear fashion, which the viewer has to maintain from year to year to be able to savor the intricacies of that progression. The vertical axis is formed by all of the various paratexts that are generated by networks and fans as the series progresses in the form of websites, spin-off texts, ancillary products, and mash-ups – the texts, in other words, which any fan of a series samples selectively, or promiscuously, on a regular basis in order to really appreciate the full transmediated richness of that metaverse.

This has become standard operating procedure for television viewing in the twenty-first century.

### **Transmedial play**

My argument is that the digital device becomes the most effective way to maneuver through that metaverse. When we hold one in our hand, we are simultaneously Viewer-Reader-Listener-User-Players. I am invoking Steven Dinehart here because I think the way he describes transmedial play in regard to phenomena such as digital art and alternate reality games can be adapted to the way we experience the metaverse of a serial narrative on an e-reader. According to Dinehart,

In a transmedial work the viewer/user/player (VUP) transforms the story via his or her own natural cognitive psychological abilities, and enables the Artwork to surpass medium. It is in transmedial play that the ultimate story agency, and decentralized authorship can be realized. Thus the VUP becomes the true producer of the Artwork. (Dinehart, 2008)

Paraphrasing Dinehart, we could say that it is through the built-in transmedial functionality of the e-reader that we necessarily surpass any one medium, and experience our own ultimate story agency as we navigate the metaverse according to our own agendas. These are the e-reader games I refer to in the title of my lecture, and like any good video game, they involve both ludic and narrative components, the narrativity in this case being a matter of how we construct our identity out of the various routes we take on the internet and the digital archives we assemble for instantaneous access.

At this point, I want to turn to the metaverse of *Mad Men* and talk about how it can be experienced on my own digital devices and, in the process, explore the two different types of transmedial narrativity that are at play. The first is within the program material, which is all about the movement between the literary and the televisual in the quality serial narrative. This scene is from episode one of Season Two and it is a particularly exuberant example of tele-literary culture, which is founded on the movement across media. Here the *story* of Don Draper, one of the *stories* Dustin Hoffman and SKY At-

lantic keep talking about, is clearly meant to be taken as the stuff of great literary writing, but it happens to be on serial television. Don Draper is not just any smoking black silhouette drinking his cocktail. One of the greatest lines of 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry, “Now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting, and modern” seems to apply to him perfectly – Don is the guy who Frank O’Hara was writing about in 1957. The fusion of the literary and the quality televisual serial could hardly be more explicit –this is where story – and great poetry –matter.

But showing you this does not really explain why this kind of serial television is so popular, and it does not reveal much about the other kind of narrative pleasure I get from the *Mad Men* metaverse as viewer-reader-user-player. I keep up with *Mad Men* on the season pass I buy from iTunes, which allows me to keep up with the forward progression of the narrative along the horizontal axis I referred to. But I can just as easily move in and out of the paratextual dimensions of that metaverse. If I visit the website, I find abundant lessons in how to *Mad Men* myself. There I can learn to make the same cocktails that Don does and even create my own *Mad Men* avatar. If I want to know more about this “Meditations in an Emergency” business, I can google it and end up at variety of blogs. But I also receive emails from *Banana Republic*, a clothing store chain and a division of GAP Inc., with updates on the release dates of their next *Mad Men* collection, which coincides annually with the season premiere of the show. I can decide whether I want to accept their invitation to the cocktail party they are having at a store near me to celebrate the re-launch of the show and the collection. And if I want to appreciate the design concepts that *Mad Men* and *Banana Republic* have in common, I can check out their design statement or even dress like Don or Betty Draper and become a real life avatar at which point the convergence between literary, visual, and material cultures come sharply into focus.

## Conclusion

That movement between sites, combined with the curatorial activity involved in downloading and arranging of libraries of MP3 files has its own kind of narrativity. By way of a conclusion, I want to reiterate the connection between seriality and digital devices, and the two types of transmedial narrativity they each depend on for their

entertainment value. This advertisement for *HBO GO on Kindle Fire* visualizes how aggressively HBO is now going after the world of mobile devices because they know that a massive percentage of its audience watches its programming not on television sets but on laptops and mobile devices. If we imagine the contemporary television serial as just another chapter in the history of adaptation which happens to take place on the small screen, we will fail to appreciate the seismic shifts that are occurring in the relationship between literary and visual culture, and in the relationship between cultural value and narrative format. Most importantly, we will fail to appreciate the ways in which both the literary bestseller and the adaptation are being transformed by all of those literary authors now writing directly for television, instead of writing the prize-winning, best-selling novels that eventually become Academy Award-winning adaptations. And if we conceive of the e-reader too narrowly, as only the newest delivery system for long-form narrative, we will fail to fully appreciate how it is a technology with its own protocols, which are based on the ability to download and archive different media and move effortlessly across them as we playlist our cultural obsessions according to our own personal narratives. Understanding how bestsellers and blockbusters work in contemporary culture depends on how we manage to account for ways that the stories that keep us up at night now move across media every night of the week – in an endless variety of shades. But it will also depend on how successful we are at accounting for the pleasures generated by the e-reader games we play on devices that are not only media technologies, but also technologies of the self in digital cultures.

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